



EXECUTIVE COMPUTING

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Voicemail could be a solution in need of problem

Have you ever run into a gadget that does such amazing things that it literally begs you to figure out a business application for it?

"Watson" fits that category. This new product is a circuit board that plugs into your IBM XT or compatible computer and attaches to your telephone line. For starters, Watson can turn your expensive computer into the equivalent of a cheap telephone answering machine, recording your voice and the voices of incoming callers in digitized form on your computer's hard disk. It can be hooked up to act and sound just like any \$50 answering device.

So far, nothing special. Recording and playing back digitized voice on a small computer is a admirable technical feat, but what can it do? Here are some of Watson's razzle-dazzle features that make an ordinary answering machine look like a Model T.

Custom messages

You can program Watson so it asks the caller to touch his personal code on his touch-tone telephone when he calls, triggering a special message that you left just for him.

For example, let's say that Jerry Jones has been calling you with an important question, but he is not in whenever you call him back. Instead of playing "telephone tag," you might leave a message for him to call you back and touch "J-O-N-E-S" on his touch-tone telephone to receive your message. The resulting "conversation" between him and your machine might go something like this:

Ring . . .

Your machine. "Hello. This is John Doe's voicemail system. If you've been given a personal access code, please use it now, touching the appropriate keys on your own telephone. If not, please leave your message for me after your hear the tone."

Mr. Jones. J-O-N-E-S

Your machine. "Jerry — thanks for calling me back. Here's the answer to your question . . . Should you wish to respond, please leave your message for me after the tone, and I'll get back to you as soon as possible."

Using Watson in this fashion, it is conceivable that you can have an entire "conversation," going back and forth by leaving messages for each other, without ever actually hearing the other person's natural, unrecorded voice!

Custom calling

What if you can't get through to Mr. Jones because his line is busy and you have to leave the office. You can't hang around until his line is free because you have another appointment, but the message is urgent and must get through. What do you do? (This assumes, of course, that you don't have an assistant or secretary to call for you.

In this case, Watson again swings into action. Using its "VIS" option, you can record a message on your machine for Mr. Jones and program it to dial his number repeatedly. As soon as it gets through, it leaves your message and allows him to record his response.

Menu messages

Although these capabilities are impressive, my guess is that most executives won't take the time and trouble to use them, even if they had the product and were willing to keep an IBM XT permanently hooked up to a telephone line. On the other hand, let me describe one of its capabilities that might indeed be useful and cost effective in some business situations.

Let's say you have five products in your product

Let's say you have five products in your product line, and your telephone order takers spend a great deal of time with each prospective customer. They have to explain the specifications of each product again and again, and constantly have to repeat the same answers all day. Let's also assume that few people are ready to buy when they call, making it frustrating for your order takers.

One solution is to set up Watson to provide information about any one or all five of the products, giving the caller a choice of which message to hear simply by touching 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 on his own telephone. After hearing the appropriate message, callers can be asked to give their name and address (or telephone number) so your order clerks can respond accordingly. In this way, follow-ups are only done with the most likely buyers, as evidenced by the requests for more information.

Alternatively, this type of "menu message" system could easily be set up to provide public service messages on different topics. Can you think of any other practical applications for the device? If so, write to me at the address below and perhaps I'll devote a future column to the ideas received.

For some people — especially the product's developers — Watson sounds like the wave of the future. Currently priced at \$598 (plus \$298 for the VIS option), I'm not so sure. It can tie up your \$4,000 computer with lots of trivia if you're not careful. On the other hand, Watson is an ingenious device that just may be able to solve a particular problem in your business. In that case, its cost may be well worth it.

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